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## BOOK DEPARTMENT.

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### REVIEWS.

*An Introduction to English Economic History and Theory.* Part II.  
*The End of the Middle Ages.* By W. J. ASHLEY, M. A. Pp. 501.  
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. London: Longmans & Co. 1893.

Professor Ashley's second volume has been watched for by a much larger group of readers than that which welcomed his first volume, five years ago. The increase of interest in the aspect of history with which he deals has been remarkable. One or two decades ago constitutional, ecclesiastical, literary, or narrative history had its thousands of interested students, while the economic and social side was still ignored. In the last few years, however, successive notable books and monographs have appeared, courses in economic history are given in several colleges, the circle of interested readers has widened, and above all, work in other fields of history is learning to give due consideration to these influences so long neglected.

Professor Ashley's work has been of a particularly definite and tangible kind. The first volume of this work gave a systematic explanation of economic conditions in England during the period succeeding the Norman Conquest and preceding the changes of the fifteenth century, a period in which such conditions could be treated as practically stationary. At least such development as occurred was considered as subordinate to the main fact of comparative permanency of institutions.

The present volume takes up the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period of far greater difficulty, and one in which much more of the work had to consist of original investigation on the part of the author. At the same time the interest of the period is greater from the very fact of its being a time of rapid change, in which various influences of society were working on one another with unusual effect. His study of the period opens with two admirable chapters on "The Supremacy of the Towns" and "The Crafts." The isolation of the towns and their independence as economic units brought about a condition of

great municipal strength, and the complete control of the magistracy over this economic life consolidated their self-government. The regulation of the conditions of the market for both local and foreign traders, the oversight of the crafts, the enforcement of the assize of bread, wine, and beer, the responsibility for the success of corporate undertakings, gave power and dignity to the city officers to a degree which has no parallel in later times, when authority has been taken into the sphere of the State and regulation abandoned in favor of the individual. The description of this municipal life given by the author is as interesting as it is new and significant. One of his statements as to the towns is, however, very different from the general belief of scholars, and we think will hardly gain acceptance, unless it can be supported with still further evidence. He says "the general impression with which we rise from the study of the period 1350-1550 is that on the whole there was a steady and constant growth of wealth in the civic communities." The view of most students is that the latter part of the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth were a period in which the greater number of the cities lost much of their population and prosperity. In the author's balancing of evidence the interpretation of the statutes for the rebuilding of houses seems somewhat forced. It is difficult after reading the laws to believe that they are only for the "removal of a nuisance." Among the arguments for believing that a diminution of civic prosperity occurred, Professor Ashley fails to include those to be drawn from the numerous statements of contemporary writers. When we find Starkey in 1537 speaking of "the common decay and ruin of the cities and towns throughout all this your realm and nation," "the desolation of cities and towns," "our cities, castles, and towns of late days ruinate and fallen down, with such poor inhabitants dwelling therein," one can scarcely doubt that as far as his observation went the cities were really more poor. In the "Commonweal of England, by W. S.," recently identified as the work of John Hales in 1549, the craftsman says "the city which was heretofore well inhabited and wealthy, is fallen for lack of occupation to great desolation and poverty." Gross speaks of the decay of the old cities as one of the great revolutions of municipal history, and cites a large number of individual instances and other references.

The chapter on the craft guilds is a much fuller and more satisfactory study of the subject than any that exists elsewhere. Among many new and interesting facts and views that he gives us, that of the late extension of the influence of the crafts is perhaps the one that will attract most attention. It has formerly been believed that the craft guilds along with so many other mediæval institutions, sank into insignificance after the period of the Reformation, while Professor Ashley shows

or gives evidence to show that the craft gilds survived the laws of 1545 and 1547, and continued to exist in scarcely diminished prosperity. The author's equipment of facts on this subject is so large that until his critics have learned to draw from the same armory, they must defer to his opinions as well as to his statements. The chapter on the "Agrarian Revolution" is confessedly incomplete and unsatisfactory. The vast change in rural life in England which occurred during the period under discussion has left its general impress on the whole literature of the time. Yet its details are still but little understood and full of difficulties. Some of the obscurity has been removed by the present volume, notably by the ingenious map, but scarcely one of the real problems has been solved. His theory of the absence of legal security of tenure in the case of the customary tenants has been recently assailed from a new source, and we are inclined to declare it still "not proven."

By its interest, its originality, and its breadth of investigation, Professor Ashley's second volume makes good the claim of his work to a position in the very first rank of works in English economic history.

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*The Commercial Policy of England toward the American Colonies.*

By GEORGE LOUIS BEER, A. M. Pp. 167. Columbia College Studies in History, Economics, and Public Laws. Vol. iii., No. 2. 1893.

Mr. Beer's monograph is a fresh and exhaustive study of a period which, save for Weeden's painstaking but discursive treatment, has been left mainly to the hasty generalizations of over-worked historians. The drift of early commercial legislation, with its half conscious economic bearing, the bolder colonial policy of James I. and Charles I., and the more comprehensive and coherent system of Cromwell and his successors in the celebrated navigation acts and laws of trade, are exhibited with abundant detail and in due perspective. The economic reasons which determined the "enumerated commodities," their detailed history, the fluctuations of trade, the steady but blundering application of mercantile principles to colonial manufacturing and the West Indies trade, are the main subjects of treatment. The colonial system was the logical outcome of the economic theories of the time; yet it was vaguely understood that in order to be able to buy, the colonies must be allowed to sell, and so there was constant agitation to secure government support to certain colonial industries useful in supplying England with raw materials, or otherwise not interfering